

# HUNTER EDUCATION AIMS

## at Lifelong Lessons

*By Luann Dart*

*Nathan W., Bismarck, is a 2006 graduate of the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's hunter education program.*

RON WILSON



When 12-year-old Kim A., Elgin, flushes her first pheasant, she'll shoulder her shotgun with confidence, thanks to volunteers who guided her through a hunter education course and paved the path for a lifetime of outdoor experiences.

Each year, 5,000 North Dakotans enroll in the North Dakota Game and Fish Department's hunter education program, designed to lead them into the field safely and expertly.

"Safety is the number one overall role," said Kim Bren, Elgin, volunteer hunter education instructor. "But I think there are bigger implications to it, too. It teaches them to be good, ethical hunters."

The class itself is more than just hunter safety, although the awareness of firearms is a big part of it, said Jon Hanson, Game and Fish Department hunter education coordinator. "It offers an awareness of the whole range of the outdoors aspect – wildlife management, ethics, conservation – so it's not just learning how to load and unload a gun," he said.

Hunter education was launched as a mandatory program in the state in 1979. Anyone born after December 31, 1961 must complete a certified hunter education course and present the certification card when purchasing a North Dakota gun hunting license. Exemptions are those who hunt only on land they own or operate, and those under age 12, who may hunt if they have an appropriate license and are accompanied by a parent or guardian.

The 14-hour course, which is free, focuses on gun safety, wildlife management, hunter ethics, laws, regulations and wildlife conservation. Enrollees must be at least 11 years old by the first class date. More than 650 volunteers across the state are certified to teach the course in their communities, according to Hanson.

"Most hunters will tell you they started with their dad or grandfather, or someone in the family hunted," Hanson said. "I think going to this course makes you aware, and makes you a safer hunter."



*Dale Bren, who coordinates the hunter education program in Elgin, has seen an increase in the number of women and girls enrolling in the course.*

## Facing Fears

As hunting evolves in North Dakota, so to does the type of participants in hunter education courses across the state, with more females enrolling, Hanson said.

Kim A., a sixth-grader, was one of 18 girls enrolled in Elgin's hunter education course last spring. "I wanted to have something to do with my dad," she said. Her experience with firearms was limited before she took the course, but now she enthusiastically explains how she learned to properly handle a gun. "I learned how to hold a gun and when to know to shoot it."

Cherie J. took the course in Elgin with her daughter, Tschida. "I learned a lot," she said, although she grew up with guns in the home. "They showed the different guns and how to load and unload and I thought that was very helpful."

As the community's first female instructor, Kim Bren has been assisting with Elgin's class for 17 years. Her husband, Dale, has been involved for 19 years and serves as coordinator for the local education program, which draws about 30 students each year. "We've had just as many girls and women as we've had guys and boys in the class and I think that's good," Kim said. "Women think they're never going to hunt, but you've got guns in your house and you have people in your house who have guns, so you should at least know how to pick one up and check if it's loaded and not be scared of it."



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*Instructor Ron Koenig, Elgin, offers a hands-on lesson to Brett B. during a hunter education course.*

“We’ve had a lot of women take it and say it’s the best thing they’ve ever done because they get over their fears,” she added. “And they feel a lot better about their kids wanting to hunt, and even their spouses hunting.”

## Safety First

Elgin’s eight volunteer instructors emphasize safety through hands-on practical lessons. Participants handle guns, learning how to safely load and unload various firearms, and practice crossing fences; they

even spend one evening target shooting with pellet guns.

But the first priority is safety, said Rick Michels, Elgin, a North Dakota Highway Patrol trooper, who has been a volunteer instructor since 2000. His wife, Deb, began assisting with the class in 2005. “The emphasis is always safety,” he said. “That’s the number one priority ...”

And many of the youth who learn safety standards during the course are passing their knowledge on – to their parents.

“I think a lot of these young kids are changing the hunting habits of moms and dads,” Rick said. “Like unloading a firearm before you cross a fence and making sure you’re shooting at the right thing and respecting the landowners and the animal.”

Kim Bren agreed: “I love it when the parents tell me the following year, ‘My kid corrected me three times when we were out hunting.’”

Rick Michels hears similar feedback: “I’ve had dads say, ‘I’ve started unloading my gun with my son when we cross the fence because he reminded me it’s the right thing to do.’”

Participants must pass both a written and practical test during the final class to become certified. Anyone 16 or older who cannot attend the sessions, which are typically held over several weeks, can enroll in an online home study course with the Game and Fish Department, but they must attend a local class with an instructor the first session for an overview and

the last session for the exam. “It’s a different way of approaching it,” Hanson said. “It’s really worked out well for people with work schedules who can’t meet over a period of three or four weeks.”

Those interested in taking a hunter education course must enroll, either with a local instructor or online, before classes begin. Courses are posted on the Game and Fish Department’s website at [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov). Classes are held across the state at various times of the year and are led by local instructors.

One common element is the willingness of the youth to learn more about hunting.

“Once these kids come, they want to learn. Some of these kids have never touched a gun in their life,” Rick Michels said. “By the second night, we have them handling guns. By the time they’re done, they can tell us the type of action and caliber, how to safely load and unload it. Just watching the gleam in their eye from the first night when they start to the last night is fun.”

Kim Bren added: “There’s always something fun about teaching something to someone young and watching them get it.”



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*Youth learn the proper methods of crossing a fence with a firearm during a hands-on sessions of the hunter education program.*



## Lifelong Lessons

Safety is not the only aspect of the course, the instructors point out. Participants gain a greater respect for wildlife, landowners and each other. "It's an awful lot about just enjoying and respecting nature, too, and passing it down to the next generation," said Kim Bren, who hunts with her husband and two sons, ages 10 and 8.

Everything these young kids do has changed hunting, Rick Michels said, stressing the hunter education program's importance in reaching youth like Kim A. and others. "Their respect isn't just for the guns, it's for everything – the organization, the landowners," he said.

Participants learn respect and ethics and they make better leaders, Deb Michels said.

The two say the class also stresses the simple enjoyment of the outdoors. "It's not so much the taking of game, but getting out there and enjoying the outdoors," Rick said.

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*For more information about the course or to learn how to become a volunteer instructor, contact hunter education, North Dakota Game and Fish Department, 100 N. Bismarck Expressway, Bismarck, N.D. 58501-5095 or call (701) 328-6615 or visit [gf.nd.gov](http://gf.nd.gov).*  
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*LUANN DART is freelance writer from Elgin, North Dakota.*



*Instructor Kim Bren helps Kim A. become more familiar with a firearm.*